

LOCATING THE CENTER: EXPLORING THE ROLES OF IN-CLASS TUTORS IN FIRST YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS

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In “Diplomatic Relations: Peer Tutors in the Writing Classroom,” Teagan Decker contends that “one of the most crucial” things that defines a writing center is “the relationship it has with those who assign the writing in the first place” (17). Decker’s contention, that looking to the other can clarify the self, poses important questions that every writing center, and writing program for that matter, should ask itself: *who are we* and *what do we do*? Essentially, we conducted this study to answer these questions. As these things are wont to do, our initial questions led to other, more specific questions: *how do/should CI composition faculty view our in-class tutors (ICT)? What expectations do we have for each other? Do the Writing Center and the composition department have an understanding of the authority of the ICT within the classroom space?*

Before delving into the study, we want to provide some basic information about who we are. We are comprised of Scott DeLoach, former CSU Channel Islands ICT and current composition instructor; Kathleen Klompian, CSUCI Writing Center Director, and three experienced undergraduate tutors in their senior years: Elyse Angel, Ebony Breaux, and Kevin Keebler. We are using the acronym ICT for both *in-class tutor* and *in-class tutoring*. Additionally, we are applying the terms *in-class tutor/in-class tutoring* synonymously with *embedded tutor/embedded tutoring*.

The ICT system was created to offer tutoring services to first-year composition (FYC) classes. Tutors are embedded in both introductory two semester “stretch” courses and advanced composition courses. Experienced tutors are typically assigned to the advanced writing courses. While all tutors receive some training about serving as an ICT, there is no

unified praxis by the composition faculty as to how ICTs should be used. Instead of starting the first week of tutoring, tutors are given a week to adjust to the new semester and get into the rhythm of working in the Center. During the second week, tutors are assigned anywhere from one to five composition sections. During week three, ICTs are embedded into their respective courses until the penultimate week of the semester.

While sessions in the center almost always last 30 minutes and are scheduled to begin and end on the hour and half hour, ICTs are embedded in the classroom for 45 minutes to an hour each week. To make sure that every student in an in-class session is seen and to enable the center to include ICT in its reporting on students served, tutors are provided with a class roster that they can refer to while helping students. After the in-class session, tutors put a mark next to the names of the students that they worked with that day and that data is kept by the Center.

At CI, composition classes last from 75 minutes to three hours. Each writing class has 20-30 students, and each of these students has a unique writing concern. These factors, coupled with the logistics of giving tutors time to make it across campus before and after the sessions, makes scheduling one of the challenges of ICT. Many times, tutors arrive when the class is mid-lecture or mid-activity. One of the realities of arriving mid-course is that there have been situations when the lecture continues for the rest of the class, leaving little time for the tutor to work with students. These challenges, amongst others, are what helped guide this study.

Methodology

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data through anonymous surveys and interviews. The participants in this study consisted of thirteen tutors from the University Writing Center, 102 students enrolled in FYC courses, and six composition department faculty members at CI. Twelve tutors, five faculty members, and 102 students participated in the initial survey portion of our study. Tutors and faculty members were then individually interviewed to garner a deeper understanding of the expectations of in-class sessions from both perspectives. Although the three tutors collaborating on this study took the initial survey, they were not interviewed.

Three surveys were generated through *SurveyMonkey.com* and the links were distributed to the participants. One survey was geared towards in-class tutors, another for in-class faculty, and the last for in-class students. The surveys consisted of both scale and open-ended questions. For the scale section of the tutor survey, tutors responded to statements by choosing strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. The following is an example taken from the survey: “I feel that faculty communicate effectively with me in terms of directions and expectations.” Some examples of the open ended questions include “What do you believe your role should be for in-class sessions?” and “Do your expectations align with the classroom reality?”

The faculty survey had a scale statement that read “I trust my in-class tutors to be on the same page as I am,” which also had five options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. An open-ended question used for this survey was “What are in-class tutors there to do, exactly?” Finally, an example of a scale statement from the in-class student survey was “I feel my instructor effectively encourages the use of in-class tutoring during class time” which again had five options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The questions used for the interviews were formulated in-part based upon the responses we received from the surveys. Scott interviewed all of the faculty members that were currently participating in the ICT program, and one faculty member that opted out for pedagogical reasons. Kevin, Ebony, and Elyse split up the interviews so that each interviewed three to four in-class tutors. After all of the interviews were conducted, the results were transcribed and coded to find any patterns and like-terms. The data we found served as a foundation for our analysis, which we will discuss later. Such a broad study resulted in a large data set. For the purposes of this article the themes we

discuss have been limited to: expectations, space, authority, time, and structure.

Expectations

The complicated triangular relationship between instructor, ICT, and student is akin to the rhetorical triangle we teach in composition, with instructor, student, and ICT replacing writer, audience, and subject. As with the rhetorical triangle, each entity influences and is influenced by the other two within the ICT Triangle. Based upon our collective experience, our research team believes that most, if not all, of the problems that arise generally are rooted in incongruous expectations: student expectations of ICTs and faculty, ICTs expectations of faculty and students, and/or faculty expectations for their students and ICTs. The interconnectedness of this relationship necessitates an understanding of the other two participants. However, this understanding is easier to describe than enact, largely because participants bring with them their own unique sets of expectations.

When asked to define the role of ICTs, faculty members answered in numerous positive ways. One instructor stated that ICTs “provide another perspective on how a reader experiences the writer’s text,” another said their role is to “support students individually and in small groups at all stages of the writing process,” and a third argued that the role of ICTs is “to give students a taste of what tutoring will be like when they come to the writing center.” Statements like these certainly indicate that composition faculty have a well formulated understanding of embedded tutoring that is aligned with current writing center philosophy.

Tutors also expressed a keen understanding of not only their own role but also of what faculty thought of their role in the classroom. One tutor positioned the ICT as “the communicative bridge between the instructor and student.” Additionally, 11 of 12 tutors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel that instructors understand what my role is and what I’m qualified to do as a tutor.”

Based upon this data, it seems that the expectations of ICTs and faculty are aligned. This is important, because our expectations frame how we interact with one another. However, even with clear expectations in place, we found that misunderstandings, ambiguity, and resistance are still present, particularly when it comes to the interaction between ICTs and students.

Space

In their introduction to the *On Location* anthology, Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman argue that the presence of ICTs “helps to decenter” the notion of instructor as the sole authority in the class (8). In many ways, the question of authority is always in play in classrooms. Many students cling to the traditional narrative of teacher as sole authority in the classroom space. It has been my experience (Scott) that getting students, especially first year students, to wholly subscribe to the notion of *peer as authority* can be difficult at first. One reason that students cling to traditional notions of education is that it’s normative, and therefore easy to subscribe to. Tutors visiting the classroom can help disrupt this normative thinking by acting as emissaries, sharing their perspective on writing collaboration with instructors and students. If the relationship between writing centers and classrooms is built upon a diplomatic model, with careful negotiation and a mindfulness of the role of tutors, not only is the integrity of the writing center preserved, the classroom becomes a fertile ground, with writing center theory infusing the curriculum and instructors witnessing collaboration in practice (Decker 18-19). Our data shows that this collaborative spirit extends beyond the classroom and into the Writing Center. We found that bringing ICTs into writing classrooms directly correlates with classrooms entering writing centers, so to speak; of 102 students surveyed, 50 stated that they are more inclined to visit the writing center because of in-class tutoring.

Statistics like this indicate there are many positives to our system. However, understanding the challenges we face is just as important as understanding the benefits. Spigelman and Grobman assert that “on-location tutoring occurs in the thick of writing instruction and writing activity,” meaning that embedded tutors often “operate within complex, hierarchical, [and] contested classroom spaces” (1). The complex issue of ICTs in the classroom space was present for me (Scott) back in the fall of 2006 when I first began to be embedded in FYC courses. I continually asked myself *Where do I fall on the spectrum between teacher and student? How do students interpret my presence in the class?* As it turns out, our current tutors grapple with these questions as well, in part due to student attitudes.

Even though 83% of our tutors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel instructors seek to establish rapport with me in-classes,” ICTs also acknowledged that their presence can be met with resistance from students. Some tutors revealed that their work at times “felt more forced”

than their work in the center, which is not surprising given what we know about writing centers and student agency. During the interview process, one tutor stated that “those who come to the writing center actually want help,” whereas in the classroom “tutors face students that aren’t willing to share or discuss their work.” This creates a challenge for the tutor and can translate to resentment from the students, making the experience “awkward and uncomfortable.”

Student writers reveal intimate details about themselves: abortions, sexual abuse, drug abuse, and other emotional hardships. The bond students develop with each other can feel stronger than with the ICT because students reveal something personal about themselves; they are, in a sense, “spilling their blood” together. The ICT, by contrast, does not complete the assignment, and therefore does not reveal any vulnerabilities about themselves; because the ICT “spills no blood,” uncomfortable students position ICTs as outsiders.

Authority

As we can see, the question of space/authority within the peer-to-peer, tutor/writer relationship can be complicated within the confines of the writing classroom. When writing instructors invite ICTs into their classroom space, they participate in the “dismantling” of the teacher-authority/student-subordinate binary to which Spigelman and Grobman allude. Our research shows that by and large, the composition faculty actively strive to disrupt “traditional” classroom dynamics by acknowledging the authority of ICTs. Seventy-five percent of tutors surveyed felt comfortable expressing opinions and offering suggestions to their respective in-class instructors, evidence of an authoritatively decentered relationship.

And yet, we must remember that simply because they aren’t *the* authority doesn’t mean that instructors don’t embody *any* authority. At the end of the day, the instructor is still ultimately responsible for framing the assignments, structuring the class time, and deciding how the ICT will be utilized. This philosophy is generally shared by the composition faculty. On the one hand, faculty members see the value of having “an experienced peer” in the classroom, someone who breaks down barriers between instructor and student, someone who is a bridge not only between instructors and students, but also between the classroom and the center. In fact, 100% of faculty surveyed agree or strongly agree that in-class tutors are helpful and that faculty communicate expectations and directions to

them effectively. Furthermore, each faculty member stated they felt like mentors to the tutors.

On the other hand, faculty members acknowledged that they could perhaps put a little more forethought into how ICTs are utilized. One faculty member admitted “[I] don’t give it as much thought as I should.” Another described their past approach to ICTs as “you do your thing and I won’t get in the way.” When placed side by side, these two pieces of information signify our current position as a composition program: we’re keen participants in the process, we acknowledge the authorial position of the tutor, but we’re not entirely sure how much energy to invest in the process, or perhaps where to invest it.

Time

As noted earlier, the time frame of ICT is usually 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the length of the class. The questions that we formulated concerning time refer to the period in which the tutor is present in the classroom. Of the students, tutors, and faculty involved in the embedded-tutoring program, there are varying standpoints concerning the effective use of the tutor’s time. Even though 40% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that the tutor’s time is used effectively, 25% of tutors disagreed or remained neutral on the matter. One faculty member expressed they needed “to organize class time better so that the tutors’ time is put to better advantage.” As experienced tutors (Elyse, Ebony, and Kevin), our perception of effective time usage may vary significantly from that of the faculty and newer tutors who participated in our study. The structure of the writing center allows for a one-to-one interaction between tutor and student for a thirty-minute period. Many times in ICT, a tutor may only be able to work with each student for a few minutes, which may skew the expectations of how time should be used.

When asked how our current program can be improved, 26 students mentioned they would like for the tutors to be in the classroom for a longer amount of time. A suggestion we (Ebony, Elyse, and Kevin) received from one of the students was, “Have more tutors in each class, and have them spend more time in the class each week.” While it would be wonderful to be able to hire additional tutors, this is not entirely feasible. Our center is lucky enough to include a small classroom where many sections of ICT are held. Additional tutors from the center are able to pop in and help out if they aren’t seeing a student. However, popping in and out really isn’t possible when classes are held across campus. Another question I (Kathleen) would like to ask tutors is how effective time use

differs from one site to another. I would even argue that it is a *good* thing that tutors are not able to “make it through” a paper in a five-minute session. Being able to tempt a student to come to the center for more help could be what success means for in-class.

Structure

Structure, in this sense, refers to the way in which the faculty member has arranged the class, which in turn affects the interaction between ICTs and students. We discovered that our composition program mainly utilizes three different in-class structures: roaming, one-to-one, and small groups. Roaming involves floating around a room of students while they are given a writing task. ICTs provide help when students request it. With the roaming method, the tutor may work with one student extensively or multiple students briefly. The second model is a one-to-one, condensed tutoring session with individual students. Usually, only 2-3 students are seen during each class period for about fifteen minutes each. Small group work involves the ICT joining 4-5 students to moderate their discussion and model effective peer feedback.

The questions we formulated about structure pertain to what structure students and tutors prefer most and why. Based on our data, structure preferences are varied among tutors. Of the ten tutors interviewed, three prefer to roam the classroom, two prefer one-to-one sessions, four prefer a mix of one-to-one sessions and roaming, and one preferred working with groups. According to our survey data collected from students, approximately 65% preferred one-to-one tutoring and 30% preferred a group setting, while the rest of the participants did not have a preference. One student noted a preference for “small group[s] because the flow of ideas goes around easier than just one on one;” however, this same student also stated that “when it comes to...really looking for help on a specific topic, one-on-one is better.” Our data suggests that roaming may be best for brainstorming activities, one-to-one sessions seem to be effective during the students’ first or second drafts, and working with groups is best during polishing stages.

Roaming seems to have the benefit of establishing a more comfortable classroom. Tutors in favor of roaming think that the role of a tutor is to establish personal connections with students in order to open communication, which leads to better conversation about their papers. Two of the three tutors who support roaming provided critiques of a one-to-one scenario. It seems that for these tutors, students need *connections* more than *corrections*. Those who believe one-

to-one sessions are superior feel that this structure best uses tutors' time in class. Although sessions during in-classes are constrained by time, more work is accomplished in this setting. For those with mixed preferences, responses indicate that the benefits of both models are experienced as long as professors are clear about their expectations for the day. Whatever method employed, faculty and tutors would ideally meet and discuss daily objectives at the beginning of in-classes (unless the tutor arrives mid-lecture). Some of these daily objectives may consist of discussing specific issues the students are working on, and/or focusing on certain students that need guidance in the theme(s) being taught.

Moving Forward

Spigelman and Grobman contend that classroom-based writing tutoring "operates amid contradictions within the productive chaos of writing classrooms," "confuses the nature of classroom authority," and, evoking Beth Bouquet's rich discussions of writing center space, "encourages noise and active collaboration at the very scene of writing" (219). Spigelman and Grobman offer a few strategic approaches as a means of negotiating this arrangement, strategies that apply directly to our own system. In fact, we are already working to integrate many of these strategies. One of their suggestions is that any writing program that seeks to incorporate writing center tutors into the writing classroom should *train tutors differently*. At CI, we have been working to make ICT an integral part of both the tutor orientation meeting (one per semester) and the tutoring course (weekly for new tutors). In the past year, we have had new tutors pair with veteran tutors during the first few in-class sessions. Once the new tutors get their bearings, their partners would leave them to tutor solo in the classes, occasionally checking in to see how things went.

Another suggestion from Spigelman and Grobman was to *prepare the teacher for the program*. At CI, we've worked to prepare our own faculty in a few ways. I (Kathleen) always raise the topic of best practices for faculty working with ICTs and make time for faculty (like Scott) to talk about what works best in class. In fact, at the 2014 fall meeting we were able to share results from our study with the other faculty. I (Kathleen) also send each ICT faculty member a copy of a guide for faculty on the dos and don'ts of ICT. Upon reflection, we are clearly doing the right things when it comes to preparing both tutors and faculty for ICT. This study reveals, however, that both faculty and tutors at CI want and need time to interact with

one another to bring the promises, lore, and theory of ICT they hear from me (Kathleen) into the context of the "productive chaos" of each instructor's actual classroom. Whether or not this desire for more communication between tutors and faculty is one of the best practices of all ICT programs is yet to be determined. However, in a setting where our composition program is still small (25 sections), and there is no uniformity from one instructor's courses to the next, the communication between faculty and tutors--without me (Kathleen) as an intermediary--is working well.

This study is also an excellent reminder of the importance of feedback and assessment of any program. As it stands, I (Kathleen), as director of the program, currently have mechanisms in place to receive feedback from all stakeholders--faculty, ICTs and students. I make it a point to check in with faculty about how their tutors are doing (especially the new tutors). Additionally, new tutors taking the class have weekly sessions to troubleshoot their tutoring, and I receive written evaluations from the students. Spigelman and Grobman would likely approve of this emphasis on feedback. And yet, the study shows me (Kathleen) that if the information gleaned from this feedback is not shared between the groups, then that information cannot help to improve the program. When I think about why this feedback is not getting cross-pollinated, I wonder if it is really about my need for control as the center director. Establishing rapport between faculty and tutors takes work, and it can't all be my responsibility. Variables exist beyond my control, and I have to trust that these interactions will go well without me there to mediate or nuance them.

The process has been a rich one for all involved. The perspective of the tutors' themselves is obviously invaluable when discussing course embedded tutors, and Ebony, Elyse, and Kevin were instrumental throughout the entire process, from planning the initial scope of the study, to conducting surveys and interviews with their colleagues, to designing our presentation at the 2014 IWCA workshop in Indianapolis and writing this article. As with any project of this type, we are left with much more work to do than we imagined when we started out. The study has encouraged us to carry on with researching how we implement ICT. And although we are still working through the data and its implications, we do know a few things. First, by and large, our system works. Second, most of the feedback received was positive: students are getting help with their writing, they understand what tutors do, and some of them come to the center for help with other writing assignments. Tutors are affirmed that their work in

classes not only helps students, but it provides them new challenges, the opportunity to see what classroom teaching is really like, and a chance to forge deeper bonds with faculty. And for faculty, the program offers them another set of eyes, an opportunity to work with upper division students who are excited about writing. This is, to harken back to Decker's initial proclamation, how we define ourselves.

Works Cited

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